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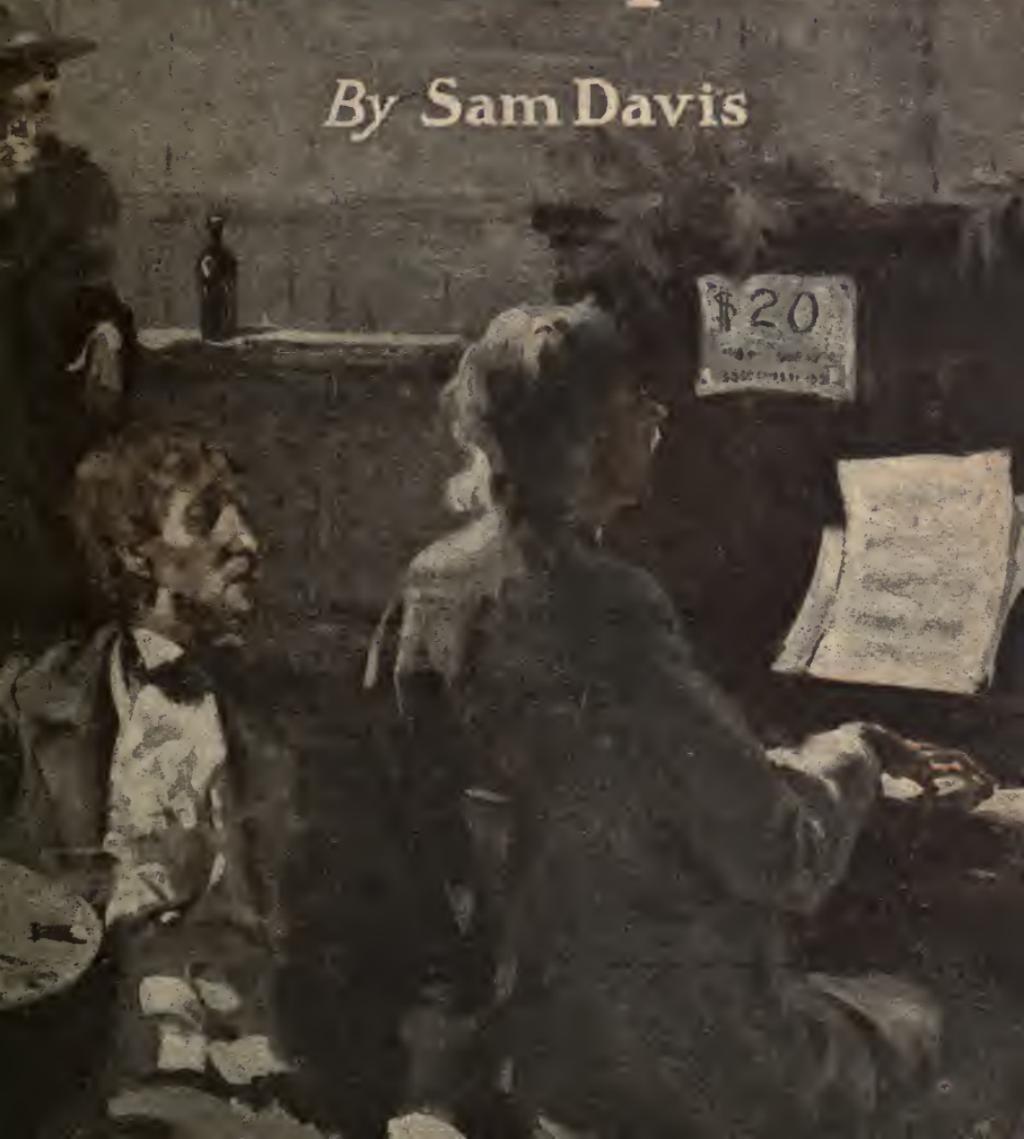
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The First Piano In Camp

By Sam Davis



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THE FIRST
PIANO IN CAMP

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Men stopped drinking with glasses at their lips . . . and cards were no longer shuffled



THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

By
SAM DAVIS

With an Appreciation by
SAM C. DUNHAM

With Drawings by
H. FISK



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THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

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ILLUSTRATIONS

MEN STOPPED DRINKING WITH GLASSES
AT THEIR LIPS . . . AND CARDS WERE
NO LONGER SHUFFLED *Frontispiece*

—LOOKED UPON IT LONGINGLY, LIKE A
HUNGRY MAN GLOATING OVER A BEEF-
STEAK IN A RESTAURANT WINDOW . . . *Facing p. 18*

“GONE!” CRIED DRISCOLL, WILDLY.
“GONE!” ECHOED GOSKIN “ 28

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

it had originally been published anonymously, a number of persons asserted that it had been written by them. These claims were quickly disproved, however, and in the numerous collections of specimens of American humor in which it now appears due credit is given to the late Sam Davis, who was brought up in the same atmosphere which gave life to the genius of Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Mr. Davis was for several years editor of *The Virginia City Enterprise* and *The Virginia City Chronicle*. At the time of his death he was the proprietor and editor of *The Carson Appeal*.

**THE FIRST
PIANO IN CAMP**

SAMUEL POST DAVIS

AN APPRECIATION BY HIS LIFELONG FRIEND

SAM C. DUNHAM

Author of "The Men Who Blaze the Trail."

I MET Sam Davis for the first time forty-five years ago in Sacramento, where he was the legislative reporter for a San Francisco newspaper—he a young man of twenty-three and I a stripling of eighteen, a compositor on *The Sacramento Union*, just arrived from a tour of the territories and all states west of the Mississippi as a peripatetic assembler of the little metallic levers that move the world. From then until his death on March 17th of last year

AN APPRECIATION

we were friends and our pathways crossed many times in the intervening years.

Sam was just then beginning a brilliant career that soon placed him high up in that remarkable galaxy of California and Nevada writers which included such names as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Charles Warren Stoddard, Sam Seabough, Dan DeQuille, Joseph T. Goodman, Rollin M. Daggett, Charles C. Goodwin, and Arthur McEwen. As an all-round reporter and as a special writer on current events he was the peer of the best of these, albeit he was much younger than the youngest of them, and had it not been for the fortuity which in the early 'eighties exiled him to Nevada and imposed on him a life

AN APPRECIATION

sentence to the daily grind of a Carson City newspaper, he might easily have taken his place as a poet with Bret Harte or as a humorist with Mark Twain. His charm as a poet is felt in reading his "Lure of the Sage-brush," "Battle-Born," "The Gleaners," "The Hour," etc., and his fine sense of humor makes *The First Piano in Camp* a little classic.

That the merit of Sam's poetry was not as enthusiastically recognized by the Eastern publishers as he felt it should have been is shown by the following extract from a letter written by him at his home in Carson City on New-Year's Eve eleven years ago and addressed to me at my home in Tonopah, where I was editor of *The Miner*, to which

AN APPRECIATION

Sam occasionally contributed. A short time before he had sent me a copy of his poem on "Jealousy," with an intimation that if it received my approval he would send it to *Harper's Magazine*. Of course I liked it and I advised him to send it on at once—that it was just the kind of poetry *Harper's* wanted, or ought to want!

I have just been thinking [wrote Sam] of another verse to wedge into that poem I sent you. Here it is:

Jealous of every wandering bee
That from your heart its sweetness sips,
And aflame at every wolfish wind
That pauses to prey on your petaled lips.

I rather think this hits off the jealousy idea about right. As a matter of fact, I have never had the slightest idea what jealousy feels like. . . . I am afraid the comparison of the wind to the wolf

AN APPRECIATION

is a little too strong for *Harper's*. . . . I hope my poem will not "come back," but I'll bet you even money it does. I thought the idea worth dressing up for some magazine, but I have little hope of its acceptance. I have been bombarding the magazines with my poems for a good many years, but none of them seem to land. Yet I think I write a good thing now and then, as you think you do. Speaking between ourselves, maybe our poetry is of the "posthumous" brand, and possibly after we are dead we may go clattering arm in arm down the coroders of fame (excuse spelling of coriders) at a two-forty clip.

Any "reader" who ever handled Sam's copy will appreciate his apology for his orthographic weakness. This apparent lapse from the conventional spelling of "corridors," however, was merely a pleasantry suggested by my criticism, in a recent

AN APPRECIATION

letter, of his persistent disregard of the rules laid down by Mr. Webster. In this instance it is safe to assume that Sam consulted the dictionary to make sure that he did not spell the word correctly!

Sam Davis was the greatest storyteller whom I have ever known—and his stories were always clean! He was an eloquent orator, many of those who heard him maintaining that he possessed greater power as a speaker than as a writer. This single paragraph from his address on “Electricity,” delivered at the celebration of the introduction of electrical power on the Comstock about twenty years ago, will serve as a sample of the whole:

It plants the first blush upon the cheek of dawn; with brush of gold upon

AN APPRECIATION

the glowing canvas of the west it tells the story of the dying day. At its mere whim and caprice it causes a thousand pillars of light to leap from the sullen seas that surge about the Pole, and on its shimmering loom it weaves the opalescent tapestries of the Aurora to hang against the dark background of the Arctic night.

Sam Davis was born in Branford, Conn., April 4, 1850. In his early 'teens his father, who was an Episcopalian clergyman, sent him to Racine College, in which institution he spent three years, after which he joined his family in the West, where he began his newspaper career as managing editor of *The Vallejo Independent* in 1872.

He had the placid temperament of a New-Englander which the romantic West fanned into a flame

AN APPRECIATION

that never wholly burned out until he died. He was possessed of super-human strength and vitality; required little sleep, and could produce in longhand more manuscript in a working-day than the average correspondent could produce in three.

In the 'eighties he moved to Nevada, where he took over *The Carson Appeal*, which, under his editorship, became celebrated throughout the United States. In his later years he was known as "The Sage-brush Oracle."

He served Nevada for eight years as State Comptroller, elected twice as the candidate of the Silver party, which he was largely instrumental in organizing in 1898. He was generous, fearless, and honest. He would have done honor to Nevada in the

AN APPRECIATION

United States Senate if she had sent him there—but he lacked the one great essential to such preferment in the Sage-brush State!

Sam Davis was the last of that august company of magicians of the pen who told from first-hand knowledge the wonderful story of the Builders of the West so eloquently described by his friend and mentor, Rollin M. Daggett, in “My New-Year’s Guests”:

The giants with hopes audacious; the
giants of iron limb;
The giants who journeyed westward
when the trails were new and dim;
The giants who felled the forests, made
pathways o’er the snows,
And planted the vine and fig-tree where
the manzanita grows;
Who swept down the mountain gorges
and painted their endless night

AN APPRECIATION

With their cabins rudely fashioned and
their camp-fires' ruddy light;
Who came like a flood of waters to a
thirsty desert plain,
And where there had been no reapers,
grew valleys of golden grain;
Who builded great towns and cities,
who swung back the Golden Gate,
And hewed from the mighty ashlar the
form of a sovereign state.

SAM C. DUNHAM.

NEW YORK CITY, *May 20, 1919.*

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

IN 1858—it might have been five years earlier or later; this is not the history for the public schools—there was a little camp about ten miles from Pioche, occupied by upward of three hundred miners, every one of whom might have packed his prospecting implements and left for more inviting fields any time before sunset.

When the day was over these men did not rest from their labors, like honest New England agriculturists, but sang, danced, gambled, and shot

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

one another, as the mood seized them.

One evening the report spread along the main street (which was the only street) that three men had been killed at Silver Reef and that the bodies were coming in. Presently a lumbering old conveyance labored up the hill, drawn by a couple of horses, well worn out with their pull. The cart contained a good-sized box, and no sooner did its outlines become visible through the glimmer of a stray light than it began to affect the idlers.

Death always enforces respect, and, even though no one had caught sight of the remains, the crowd gradually became subdued, and when the horses came to a standstill the cart was immediately surrounded. The

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

driver, however, was not in the least impressed with the solemnity of his commission.

“All there?” asked one.

“Haven’t examined. Guess so.”

The driver filled his pipe and lit it as he continued:

“Wish the bones and load had gone over the grade!”

A man who had been looking on stepped up to the man at once.

“I don’t know who you have in that box, but if they happen to be any friends of mine I’ll lay you alongside.”

“We can mighty soon see,” said the teamster, coolly. “Just burst the lid off, and if they happen to be the men you want I’m here.”

The two looked at each other for a moment, and then the crowd

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

gathered a little closer, anticipating trouble.

“I believe that dead men are entitled to good treatment, and when you talk about hoping to see corpses go over a bank, all I have to say is that it will be better for you if the late lamented ain’t my friends.”

“We’ll open the box. I don’t take back what I said, and if my language don’t suit your ways of thinking, I guess I can stand it.”

With these words the teamster began to pry up the lid. He got a board off, and then pulled out some rags. A strip of something dark, like rosewood, presented itself.

“Eastern coffins, by thunder!” said several, and the crowd looked quite astonished.

Some more boards flew up, and

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

the man who was ready to defend his friend's memory shifted his weapon a little. The cool manner of the teamster had so irritated him that he had made up his mind to pull his weapon at the first sight of the dead, even if the deceased was his worst and oldest enemy. Presently the whole of the box-cover was off, and the teamster, clearing away the packing, revealed to the astonished group the top of something which puzzled all alike.

"Boys," said he, "this is a pioneer!"

A general shout of laughter went up, and the man who had been so anxious to enforce respect for the dead muttered something about feeling dry, and the keeper of the nearest bar was several ounces better off

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

by the time the boys had given the joke all the attention it called for.

Had a dozen dead men been in the box, their presence in the camp could not have occasioned half the excitement that the arrival of the lonely piano caused. But the next morning it was known that the instrument was to grace a hurdy-gurdy saloon owned by Tom Goskin, the leading gambler in the place. It took nearly a week to get this wonder on its legs, and the owner was the proudest individual in the state. It rose gradually from a recumbent to an upright position amid a confusion of tongues, after the manner of the Tower of Babel.

Of course everybody knew just how such an instrument should be put up. One knew where the "off

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP
hind leg" should go, and another
was posted on the "front piece."

Scores of men came to the place
every day to assist.

"I'll put the bones in good order."

"If you want the wires tuned up,
I'm the boy."

"I've got music to feed it for a
month."

Another brought a pair of blankets
for a cover, and all took the liveliest
interest in it. It was at last in a
condition for business.

"It's been showin' its teeth all the
week. We'd like to have it spit out
something."

Alas! there wasn't a man to be
found who could play upon the in-
strument. Goskin began to realize
that he had a losing speculation on
his hands. He had a fiddler, and a

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

Mexican who thrummed a guitar. A pianist would have made his orchestra complete. One day a three-card-monte player told a friend confidentially that he could "knock any amount of music out of the piano if he only had it alone a few hours to get his hand in." This report spread about the camp, but on being questioned he vowed that he didn't know a note of music. It was noted, however, as a suspicious circumstance that he often hung about the instrument and looked upon it longingly, like a hungry man gloating over a beefsteak in a restaurant window. There was no doubt that this man had music in his soul, perhaps in his finger-ends, but did not dare to make trial of his strength after the rules of harmony



—looked upon it longingly, like a hungry man gloating over a beefsteak in a restaurant window.

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

had suffered so many years of neglect. So the fiddler kept on with his jigs, and the greasy Mexican pawed his discordant guitar, but no man had the nerve to touch the piano. There were doubtless scores of men in the camp who would have given ten ounces of gold-dust to have been half an hour alone with it, but every man's nerve shrank from the jeers which the crowd would shower upon him should his first attempt prove a failure. It got to be generally understood that the hand which first essayed to draw music from the keys must not slouch its work.

It was Christmas Eve, and Goskin, according to his custom, had decorated his gambling-hell with sprigs of mountain-cedar and a shrub whose

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

crimson berries did not seem a bad imitation of English holly. The piano was covered with evergreens, and all that was wanting to completely fill the cup of Goskin's contentment was a man to play the instrument.

"Christmas night, and no piano-pounder," he said. "This is a nice country for a Christian to live in."

Getting a piece of paper, he scrawled the words:

<p>\$20 REWARD To a COMPETENT PIANO-PLAYER</p>
--

This he stuck up on the music-rack, and, though the inscription glared at the frequenters of the room until midnight, it failed to draw any musician from his shell.

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

So the merrymaking went on; the hilarity grew apace. Men danced and sang to the music of the squeaky fiddle and worn-out guitar as the jolly crowd within tried to drown the howling of the storm without. Suddenly they became aware of the presence of a white - haired man crouching near the fireplace. His garments—such as were left—were wet with melting snow, and he had a half-starved, half-crazed expression. He held his thin, trembling hands toward the fire, and the light of the blazing wood made them almost transparent. He looked about him once in a while as if in search of something, and his presence cast such a chill over the place that gradually the sound of the revelry was hushed, and it seemed that this

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

waif of the storm had brought in with it all the gloom and coldness of the warring elements. Goskin, mixing up a cup of hot egg-nog, advanced and remarked, cheerily:

“Here, stranger, brace up! This is the real stuff.”

The man drained the cup, smacked his lips, and seemed more at home.

“Been prospecting, eh? Out in the mountains—caught in the storm? Lively night, this! . . . Must feel pretty dry?”

The man looked at his streaming clothes and laughed, as if Goskin’s remark was a sarcasm.

“How long out?”

“Four days.”

“Hungry?”

The man rose up and, walking over to the lunch-counter, fell to

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

work upon some roast bear, devouring it like any wild animal would have done. As meat and drink and warmth began to permeate the stranger he seemed to expand and lighten up. His features lost their pallor and he grew more and more content with the idea that he was not in the grave. As he underwent these changes the people about him got merrier and happier, and threw off the temporary feeling of depression which he had laid upon them.

“Do you always have your place decorated like this?” he finally asked of Goskin.

“This is Christmas Eve,” was the reply.

The stranger was startled. “December twenty-fourth, sure enough.”

“That’s the way I put it up, pard.”

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

“When I was in England I always kept Christmas. But I had forgotten that this was the night. I’ve been wandering about in the mountains until I’ve lost track of the feasts of the Church.

“Where’s the player?” he asked.

“Never had any,” said Goskin, blushing at the expression.

“I used to play when I was young.”

Goskin almost fainted at the admission. “Stranger, do tackle it and give us a tune! Nary man in this camp ever had the nerve to wrestle with that music-box.” His pulse beat faster, for he feared that the man would refuse.

“I’ll do the best I can,” he said.

There was no stool, but, seizing a candle-box, he drew it up and seated

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

himself before the instrument. It only required a few seconds for a hush to come over the room.

"That old coon is going to give the thing a rattle."

The sight of a man at the piano was something so unusual that even the faro-dealer, who was about to take in a fifty-dollar bet on the trey, paused and did not reach for the money. Men stopped drinking, with the glasses at their lips. Conversation appeared to have been struck with a sort of paralysis, and cards were no longer shuffled.

The old man brushed back his long, white locks, looked up to the ceiling, half closed his eyes, and in a mystic sort of reverie passed his fingers over the keys. He touched but a single note, yet the sound

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP thrilled the room. It was the key to his improvisation, and as he wove his chords together the music laid its spell upon every ear and heart. He felt his way along the keys like a man treading uncertain paths, but he gained confidence as he progressed, and presently bent to his work like a master. The instrument was not in exact tune, but the ears of his audience did not detect anything radically wrong. They heard a succession of grand chords, a suggestion of paradise, melodies here and there, and it was enough.

“See him counter with his left!” said an old rough, enraptured.

“He calls the turn every time on the upper end of the board,” responded a man with a stack of chips in his hand.

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

The player wandered off into the old ballads they had heard at home. All the sad and melancholy and touching songs, that came up like dreams of childhood, this unknown player drew from the keys. His hands kneaded their hearts like dough and squeezed out tears as from a wet sponge.

As the strains flowed one upon the other the listeners saw their homes of long ago reared again; they were playing once more where the apple-blossoms sank through the soft air to join the violets on the green turf of the old New England states; they saw the glories of the Wisconsin maples and the haze of the Indian summer blending their hues together; they recalled the heather of Scottish hills, the white cliffs of

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

Britain, and heard the sullen roar of the sea, as it beat upon their memories vaguely. Then came all the old Christmas carols, such as they had sung in church thirty years before; the subtle music that brings up the glimmer of wax tapers, the solemn shrines, the evergreen, holly, mistletoe, and surpliced choirs. Then the remorseless performer planted his final stab in every heart with "Home, Sweet Home."

When the player ceased the crowd slunk away from him. There was no more revelry and devilment left in his audience. Each man wanted to sneak off to his cabin and write the old folks a letter. The day was breaking as the last man left the place, and the player, with his head on the piano, fell asleep.



“Gone!” cried Driscoll, wildly.
“Gone!” echoed Goskin.

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP

“I say, pard,” said Goskin, “don’t you want a little rest?”

“I feel tired,” the old man said. “Perhaps you’ll let me rest here for the matter of a day or so.”

He walked behind the bar, where some old blankets were lying, and stretched himself upon them.

“I feel pretty sick. I guess I won’t last long. I’ve got a brother down in the ravine—his name’s Driscoll. He don’t know I’m here. Can you get him before morning? I’d like to see his face once before I die.”

Goskin started up at the mention of the name. He knew Driscoll well.

“He your brother! I’ll have him here in half an hour.”

As Goskin dashed out into the storm the musician pressed his hand to his side and groaned. Goskin

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP
heard the word "Hurry!" and sped
down the ravine to Driscoll's cabin.
It was quite light in the room when
the two men returned. Driscoll was
pale as death.

"My God! I hope he's alive! I
wrongsed him when we lived in Eng-
land, twenty years ago."

They saw the old man had drawn
the blankets over his face. The two
stood a moment awed by the thought
that he might be dead. Goskin
lifted the blanket and pulled it down,
astonished. There was no one there!

"Gone!" cried Driscoll, wildly.

"Gone!" echoed Goskin, pulling
out his cash-drawer. "Ten thousand
dollars in the sack, and the Lord
knows how much loose change in the
drawer!"

The next day the boys got out,

THE FIRST PIANO IN CAMP
followed a horse's track through the
snow, and lost it in the trail lead-
ing toward Pioche.

There was a man missing from the camp. It was the three-card-monte man, who used to deny point-blank that he could play the scale. One day they found a wig of white hair, and called to mind when the "stran-
ger" had pushed those locks back when he looked toward the ceiling for inspiration on the night of De-
cember 24, 1858.

THE END

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